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YIYUN LI

The Ground Floor

O.

They called me Carp at school because I had a big head. I was not the only child who had a big head, but I was the only one stuck with the name of the most stupid fish, the one that had landed on people's dinner plates more than any other fish I had known. Other children had other nicknames—Ping-Pong Ball, Eggplant, Light Bulb—all better than mine because they were not my nickname.

It was not any better at home. Sister Jin called me Piglet. Grandpa called me Little. Mom, when she was in a good mood, called me Bunny, Penguin, Duckling, any name of a harmless animal, but when her sunny mood turned overcast, as it often did without warning, I became Wolverine. Dad was the only one who used my real name, but he spoke the least in the family, so it did not help much.

A second floor auntie called me Rubber Doll, a name reminding me of the mud-covered rubber boots the grownups wore on rainy days. The upper level aunties all called me Little Fat Jin, meaning I was the fat little sister of Jin. Uncles in the building usually responded only with a nod when I greeted them, and when they needed to say a word to me, they called me Li's Daughter.

I was seven going on eight, anxiously waiting for the day I would be the respectable age of ten, when my real name would take a firmer stand.

"Ten years old and you are done with your human years," Grandpa warned me. This was the ancient tale he had told me: at the beginning of the world, Man was assigned a life span of ten years. As he grew older and smarter, Man, naturally, was not satisfied with the short ten years he got. He went to God and asked for more years, but God refused, saying the request would throw off the balance of the world. Man cried and cried, and his tears moved a hundred animals. One by one they entered the palace of God, and asked to give up a year of their own lives for Man. God assented, and Man got another hundred years. "That's why you never hear of a person older than a hundred and ten," Grandpa said. "And a man is a pure

human being only in the first ten years. Ten years old and you start to live your animal years.”

I thought about his words. Knowing I was in my precious human years kept me happy for a few hours, until I went out and bumped into Uncle Bao’s fourth daughter. “Big-Head,” she called out to me, and I had to stop and listen to her sing the song she made for me:

Big-Head, Big-Head, you don’t have to worry when it starts to rain.

Other people forget their umbrellas, but you always have your big head.

1.

We lived on the ground floor of a six-story building, in the residential section of a research institute in the suburbs of Beijing, where most fathers, mathematicians and physicists, worked in nuclear weapon development. Our home was a two-bedroom flat. My parents lived in the big bedroom; Grandpa, Sister Jin and I shared the small bedroom.

We were the least crowded family on the ground floor. Uncle Bao’s family lived in a two-bedroom flat, too, four of his teenage children, two boys and two girls, sleeping in a room with a curtain in between the two double beds. Uncle Bao was the only father who was not a scientist in our building. He worked as the head of maintenance for the Institute, a more powerful position, in my opinion, than most of our fathers had, for he alone decided who would receive an express service from the plumbers and who would have water dripping into their pots and pans overnight. That’s why I waited for his daughter to finish her song before I left, and why Sister Jin gave up the stamps she had collected for two years to Bao’s daughters when they asked.

In another flat, Uncle Kim lived with his wife, Crazy Woman, and Crazy Woman’s family: her grandmother, her mother, her unmarried younger sister growing old. Uncle Kim and Crazy Woman’s twin daughters used to live with them, the two most beautiful and identical girls I had ever seen, but as Crazy Woman became crazier, they were sent to live with their relatives in Shanghai. Once a year they came to visit their parents, their hair black and shining, draping to their waists. Talk about my better twin came up when Mom and Sister Jin saw the twins. They could go on for an hour and create a twin sister for me, a girl cuter and smarter, whose every virtue mirrored one of my deficiencies. “We would only love her

then," Mom and Sister Jin told me. "And we wouldn't have to make do with you." I laughed, as I knew they were joking. But were they joking? The more I pondered, the less sure I was. I thought about the other twin who was not here, imagining how I would divide everything I owned into halves and share with her. The name Carp was to go to her, I decided, as she was the better one who would have to bear things for us.

2.

I was about to enter the building when Crazy Woman came out to the hallway with a bald mop. I stepped back, and stepped back again until I was at a safe distance, ready to sprint away any minute.

"Good afternoon, Auntie," I greeted her.

The way she looked at me made my hair stand on end, as if she was recognizing me for someone I was not. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm going home," I said, pointing at our door, trying to think of a safe way past her. I wondered if she was going to club me. I had such worries often, even though Mom forbade me to make any comments on Crazy Woman's illness. Mom believed crazy people did not do much harm to the world, as her mother, her aunt, and two of her female cousins had all been crazy women. Her mother—my grandmother—had been the only one to live past fifty, the only one who had not strangled or drowned or poisoned herself to death.

Crazy Woman seemed to have lost interest in me. She walked toward Bao's door and stopped in front of the coal bricks the Baos kept in the hallway. Bao's family was the only one still using coal for cooking, for, powerful as Uncle Bao was, he was not a scientist so his family did not get a gas ration.

"Let me beat the black devil out of you," Crazy Woman said to the coal bricks and started to club them. It amazed me how easily they crumbled. I waited for Crazy Woman to finish and tiptoed across the black coal dust to our door, wondering if Crazy Woman would one day let that mop fall on my head. The thought made my scalp tighten.

In the evening Auntie Bao wailed in the hallway. Uncle Bao pounded on Kim's door, and Uncle Kim came out with money and an apology. But money would do nothing, Uncle Bao yelled at Uncle Kim. Money would not buy back the wasted ration of their

coals. Auntie Bao brought out a pot of rice and put it in front of Kim's door, telling Uncle Kim to cook the rice for them. Uncle Kim looked down at the pot for a while and picked it up, closing the door behind him.

The next day Uncle Kim applied for a transfer to the base in the Gobi Desert for a long-term assignment. Before he left, he came to talk to Dad and Mom and asked them to keep an eye on his wife, his face squeezed into a mess of tears and sighs, the first man I had seen crying, so ugly yet so funny.

"What was he crying for?" I asked Mom after Uncle Kim left.

"It's none of your business," Mom said.

"What was he crying for?" I asked Sister Jin when Mom was not around.

"Because he would have to cook for Uncle Bao every day if he stayed," Sister Jin said.

"Then why do we have to watch Crazy Woman for him?" I asked.

"Because if Crazy Woman goes crazy again, he can just tell Uncle Bao to talk to us because we are responsible," Sister Jin said.

"Who told you to talk about other people's business?" Mom said behind us. Sister Jin turned pale, but Mom was busy at the moment so she let us go without further words. We left our flat before Mom could change her mind. Sister Jin went to her best friend's home, while I, having no such place to go, sat down on the stair in the hallway. I looked at where the coals had been and worried about our ration of propane. What if Auntie Bao asked us to cook for her, and our gas ran out before its time?

3.

This was a dangerous world. I asked Dad if he could teach me some Kung Fu, as he had been a martial arts champion in college. I imagined myself surfacing from a fight with Crazy Woman, unharmed, and pressed Dad more when he failed to respond to my request.

He made me practice *Chi* first. Every morning, I stood in a half squatting position on our balcony, my arms stretching out, pretending I was holding a huge, round-bellied jar. I was to concentrate on the open space between my arms, imagining a full jar of water, trying to counter its weight with the strength of my whole body,

standing still until the last drop of water evaporated and my body was refreshingly lightened.

I did not have to imagine the water to feel the shaking of my legs and my arms. Five minutes into the practice and I was already losing my posture. Dad told me to practice more and promised that when I could stand for an hour, he would start teaching me shadowboxing.

An hour of standing seemed easy, but the jar of water worried me. So many distractions around that I could barely keep my mind's eye on the undisturbed water surface for half a minute before I had to let it wander away. Two boys were playing trumpets on a second floor balcony, and I imagined stringing their hesitant and off-tuned notes and climbing to the second floor along the rope as a real Kung Fu master. An upper floor auntie who was hanging wet laundry told me to move so it would not drip on my head. A girl from the next building came to Kim's window and called the name of Crazy Woman's younger sister in a singsong voice. I knew the girl. She was a former student of Mom and one of four girls in their late twenties who hadn't been married off. Often she came to Kim's window and the two girls would talk, one inside the window and one outside. I listened to their plan to go to a reservoir together and wondered if any boys would accompany them. Several times the girl's mother had come to Mom and asked Mom to talk to the girl about the importance of marriage. I imagined myself sent back to my elementary school teacher for an hour of education and decided that I would get married before turning old, so I would not have to face such an embarrassment.

4.

I quit practicing *Chi* because it was doing me no good. I decided to take a quicker path. Someone in school told me about a boy who had practiced poking his finger on a brick wall for years and had accidentally killed another boy when he poked his finger into the boy's chest. That was what I needed, a finger that did not require *Chi* to fight.

I chose to sit on the stairs in the hallway and poke my index finger a thousand times into the same spot on the wall. As an excuse, I had an issue of *Children's Literature* open on my lap. Reading a book in the dark hallway was an act less incomprehensible than poking a

dumb finger into our bedroom wall. If Mom asked what I was doing in the hallway, I could always say I was making room for Sister Jin, who was spending her days among deep piles of exercise books, preparing for the entrance exam for junior high.

Already the spot was lighter than the other part of the dust-covered wall. I imagined a hole growing deeper as days and months and years went by. I imagined walking around with a finger that killed. Of course people would not know my secret, as real Kung Fu masters concealed themselves, but when danger approached, I would poke my ruthless finger at the enemy's heart. I dreamed about the clicking of the reporters' cameras when they would photograph the hole my finger had left on the wall, and all this time my finger did not miss a beat, jabbing the wall the way Mom thrust her finger at my forehead.

Someone was walking downstairs as I was about to finish the practice. I hurried to poke the last ten times and picked up the book, pretending to read the "Communism-is-heaven-capitalism-is-hell" column. The person slowed down as she approached the end of the stairs, where I was blocking the way. I was prepared to stand at the last second and greet an uncle or an auntie, who, without doubt, would praise me for my devoted reading.

But when I looked up, I saw the expressionless face of Moyu, her eyes looking down at the floor, both arms bent at her back. I said hi and she did not reply, waiting with painful patience for me to let her pass.

5.

Moyu was part of the reason I was practicing my finger, but she would never know. She was eight, the only other child in the building who was not in her animal age yet. She had grown up with her grandparents and had only recently moved back to her parents' fifth-floor flat. I wanted to befriend her and protect her. This was not a safe world for her. I could tell by the way she placed her bent arms nicely on her back, a pupil ready to be chastised for any wrongdoing. I pursued her attention relentlessly and she ignored me with equal obstinacy.

I stood up and let her pass, watching her walk in a heavy way, as if she had to think where to put her foot down for every step, yet the

foot always went to the wrong place. A moment later her mother swirled down the stairs.

"Good afternoon, Auntie," I said when her mother walked past me.

"Why are you still around? Where is your mom? It's bath time," she said, and rushed out before I replied.

I sighed. I did not know why the public bathhouse was so attractive to adults. Saturday and Sunday afternoons the bathhouse opened its doors, swallowing swarms of people into its steaming belly. No one was excused from the collective bath time. An auntie who lived in the next building never took her daughters to the bathhouse. I had heard aunties in the bathhouse discuss their eccentricity. "They must have an ugly secret that they are afraid to show us," they all agreed.

"What's wrong with them if they don't go to the bathhouse?" I asked Mom. "I don't want to go, either."

"A good person does not have a secret," Mom said. "A good person does not fear people's scrutiny."

I could not disagree more, but who cared about my opinion? I trailed behind Mom to the bathhouse, already sweating with dread and exhaustion. Sister Jin, always the better daughter, had gone to the bathhouse with her friends. She did not hate the Saturday bath as I did. She had her own social circle, big girls who could laugh at anything in the world.

As we entered, my heart pumped faster. The soggianness clinging to my skin made me feel like a toad. I wondered if I would faint again today, and if I did, whether Mom would change her mind about the bathhouse. White naked bodies and hot muggy air, aunties' gossiping and big girls' giggling all made me dizzy. Several times I had gone weak in the bathhouse, gold stars swimming in front of my eyes, the wet floor becoming less solid as if I were walking in a pile of cotton. Dad said we should not stay in the bathhouse for two hours. Mom said it would be suspicious if we did not put in enough time cleaning ourselves. She now sent me, every ten minutes or so, to the door to breathe in fresh air, but she did not understand that the air in the locker room was not any fresher. I hated to stand outside the door and watch people dress and undress, my body dripping and shivering, my stomach churning in a funny way.

I stood under a shower and lowered my head, watching the water dripping from my hair and my chin. It was the only way to ignore the din. If I concentrated hard enough, I could see a drop of water falling, first slowly as if in a dream and then picking up speed, disappearing into a puddle of water by my feet. Then I tried another drop, and another drop. I was amazed by the time it took for them to reach the floor. I felt like a tower when I watched the water drop.

A hand patted me and I looked up. Moyu's mother said, "Now let Moyu take a wash." I stepped away from the water and waited for her to step into the magic shower.

Moyu did not move, her two arms still bent behind her. I looked at her and she looked back with a pleading look.

"Quick. Don't waste the water," Moyu's mother said, grabbing her arm and pulling her into the shower. She panicked and I caught her secret before her arms returned to their guarding position: a stretch of skin on her back, just above her waist, about two inches wide and four inches long, was covered with dark and dense hair.

I gasped. I had heard stories about the wolf child, tiger child, leopard child, babies who had been left in the wild and had grown up among the beasts, their hair growing longer and covering their bodies. I wondered if Moyu had been one of them. Then I realized I was staring at her, and she was staring back without hiding her hatred. I smiled weakly to her. I wanted to tell her not to worry because I would not tell her secret to anyone. I wanted to say let's pretend there is nothing growing on your back and let's be friends. I wanted to say anything to make her hate me less, but her eyes chilled my bones, even in the steaming bathhouse.

6.

From a friend of his, Dad found a copying job for the family. Every week he came home with big folders of newspaper, months of *People's Daily*, *Beijing Daily*, *New People's Daily*, and other newspapers I had never heard of. Someone, an editor maybe, had circled with red ink all the articles on building a stronger communist nation in the new decade, and we were to copy the articles onto writing paper with oversized grids for the typesetting workers.

After dinner we all sat down and copied, Sister Jin and I at the opposite sides of our only desk, Mom and Dad at our dinner table. Dad bought a gallon bottle of black ink and every few days refilled

the glass bottles on the desk and the dinner table. Grandpa walked from the table to the desk and from the desk to the table. Over my shoulder he looked at the big fat characters I put down on the grid paper and pointed out that my handwriting predicted I would grow up into a lazy person with no discipline and no accomplishments, as the characters I put down were all flesh, lacking bones and sinews.

I tried to ignore his comment, but every night he said it over my shoulder until I started to believe him. It saddened me that so much of the future was already set, and still we had to live towards that inglorious life.

As if to prove Grandpa right, I turned out to be a slow worker even at the simplest job of copying newspaper. Mom and Dad copied fast, and they could even chat without slowing down. Sister Jin was only allowed to work for an hour each night, for she was in junior high now and needed to spend more time on her schoolwork. Still, she finished more pages in an hour than I did in three hours. I tried hard to concentrate on the articles inside the red circles, but my eyes had their own will, wandering away and going to all the wrong places until I read everything outside the red circle.

Every few minutes, Mom reminded me not to stop copying, even though I was sitting with my back to her, and she could not see me reading the news article translated from a western newspaper about a mermaid discovered in the Soviet Union. There was even a picture, a lady's two legs merging into a slippery fish tail.

My heart was filled with wonder at this marvelous world, but my pen did not stop its trudging. I had mastered the skill of copying one article and reading another at the same time, my eyes and my hand doing their own jobs as if they did not belong to the same person.

7.

A few nights later, in another issue of the same newspaper, I read an editor's note on the misleading report of the Soviet mermaid. It had been an April Fools' Day prank, the editor said, and the translator had made the mistake of taking it as front-page news. The editor then apologized for spreading rootless rumors and promised to work harder as "engineers of human souls."

I imagined reading the note aloud to the whole family and making them laugh with me, but I was not in a laughing mood. I was copying with a heavier heart tonight because of the other news I had read.

In a nearby city some stalker had been slitting young girls' calves and arms with a razor blade on the bus. A lot of girls, the news said, didn't even pay attention to the sting until people around cried out loud about the bleeding.

This was a dangerous world. Bad things would happen before my finger gained its power. At night I could not sleep, poking my finger at the wooden bed frame and worrying about Sister Jin, who had to spend two hours on the bus every day when she went to school. I prayed for the winter to come quicker so she would stay safe under layers of clothes.

8.

When the winter finally arrived, we finished all the copying work. A hard bump had grown on my middle finger where I had held the pen too tight, but the twenty-four *yuan* I had earned were worth any discomfort. I counted and recounted the bills, making plans to buy a woolen hat for Grandpa, a new fountain pen for Dad, a vase for Mom, a scarf for Sister Jin, and for myself a mechanical pencil, a barrette, a set of water colors, and the first chocolate of my life. My list was growing longer each day, but when Mom asked us to donate the money for a television set, I gave up my list readily.

Sister Jin was sick, running a high fever and eating nothing. On the day she went to her midterm exams, Dad bought a quarter kilo of chocolate for her and told her to eat the chocolate when she felt too weak. In the evening she took the bus home, and on the way back from the bus station, someone pointed out to her the big cross on her down coat, cut at the position of her hips by a razor blade. Sister Jin came home crying, and fine feathers came out through the wound, white and fluffy. But a few minutes later she started to laugh at the incident, her voice a pitch too high, her cheeks feverish and crimson. Mom cursed about the hideous crime. Grandpa sighed about the deteriorating society. Dad tried to sew the cross up, and when he could not, he set out to look for a patch of cloth in the same color of the down coat. All the time Sister Jin was giggling. I thought it was the chocolate that caused this unusual mood, but I was wrong. When we were alone in our bedroom, she took out the bag of chocolates and told me to eat them. She had saved every single piece of chocolate for me, because, as she said, she had enough energy without the chocolates.

I stayed awake long past bedtime on my first chocolate night, my blood running too fast, my face burning hot. I felt sad for Sister Jin's down coat. I felt relieved that she was not hurt. I dreaded the next day when Sister Jin would have to go back to the bus.

The next day Sister Jin and I were both diagnosed with scarlet fever. For weeks we stayed at home. I felt happy even when we were arguing. Sister Jin did not have to take a bus, and I felt less worried when I could keep my eyes on her.

9.

Crazy Woman was becoming crazier each day, but Mom insisted that she was at most a small inconvenience. Such a belief was doubtful when Crazy Woman cut the cotton strings on our bamboo curtain with a pair of scissors and scratched our door with her fingernails at night. When Dad replaced the bamboo curtain with a screen door that could be bolted from inside, she used a knife to carve her name on the wooden frame.

There was no such thing as harmless craziness. Mom asked Dad often if he thought she was becoming a crazy woman, and he always replied no. I thought about her question and wondered if Dad was lying, and what I could do if, indeed, he was.

One day I wore a woolen scarf to school and left it in my desk drawer. Mom saw my bare neck and sent me stumbling with a heavy kick on my shin. Several steps away I fell into the large basin where we collected used water from our laundry to mop our floor. I sat in the soapy water and looked up at Mom, who was cursing and crying and saying things too fast for me to understand: my mother bought the scarf for me as a gift for my twentieth birthday and I have only worn it on special occasions how dare you steal it from me and then lose it now are you trying to kill your mom I know you are I know you are you filthy wolverine but let me tell you there is no good in it for you if you kill me you are an orphan because your dad will marry a stranger and no stepmother will love you only your own mom loves you but you are trying to kill your mother now go ahead kill me kill me and you will have an ugly death too.

I watched her anger gushing out like an erupting volcano, not thinking of getting out of the water until Sister Jin gave me a hand and pulled me out of the basin. I stood up, and water dripped from my pants into my shoes. Sister Jin fetched a pair of pants for me, but

I did not dare to move. We stood there together and listened, but Mom seemed to be repeating herself in an endless circle. Grandpa listened for a few minutes and went back to our shared bedroom, closing the door behind him. Dad stayed in the kitchen, and when he finished cooking, he came out to tell Mom that dinner was ready. "Shut up," Mom said. "Don't try to change the topic." She needed to get her anger out, she said, and asked us what we preferred, an angry mother or a crazy one.

What she did not understand was that I was more afraid of living an ugly life than dying an ugly death. What she did not know was that I no longer practiced my finger in the hallway. I could own a finger that killed, but I did not know where to point my finger. I could poke at the air a thousand times, but the enemy was not there for me to see.

10.

Every spring Dad and I planted vegetables in our small garden. Every autumn a fourth-floor granny came before our first harvest, picking the green beans and the tomatoes while humming to herself. The first time I caught her, I was playing on our balcony. I hid behind a trunk and watched her, not knowing if I should yell out to stop her.

When I told my parents the incident, they said, "That's all right. She doesn't have a garden."

"But she is stealing from us," I said.

"You can't be so rude," they said. "She once sewed a coat for you when you were a baby."

The next year the granny came and gathered our vegetables to her basket. I hid behind the window curtain and watched her. My parents had told me not to go out onto the balcony when she was around. "Don't embarrass her," they said. "Think about the coat she sewed for you when you were a baby."

She came back yet another year. "She cannot come every year to pick up our vegetables," I said to Sister Jin. "She cannot do this forever even though she sewed a coat for me when I was a baby."

She did not have the chance to do it to us forever. That fall she died of a heart attack, a few days before I turned ten.